This paper places the nuclear debate with North Korea (1994-2009) in the context of American technical assistance in East Asia, especially with reference to the ‘Atoms for Peace’ program. Why did new (South Korea, Taiwan) and recovering nations (Japan) eagerly participate in American programs offering new forms of training and technical exchange? With South Korea as its starting point, the paper addresses this question by bringing together Korean and American sources concerning the Michigan Memorial Phoenix Project, which served as the on the ground advisory body to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) for much of the early period, overseeing the training phases and the installation of a research reactor. In South Korea specifically, this meant a series of site visits (1958-59) and advice to adopt a gradual approach toward research, while also assisting the South Koreans with their electric power issues by conventional means, thus deferring the issue of atomic energy. The paper ultimately argues that tense relations over the power issue, with South Korea in the 1950s and 60s, and with North Korea since the early 1990s, are linked by a similar set of historical concerns; and that any approach to the North Korean situation therefore needs to consider the critical issue of energy autonomy.

Korea in the East, like Berlin in Europe, is a symbol of the West’s determination to foster freedom of individual choice wherever this freedom manifests itself (Whipple and Kerr: 3).

1 Nuclear Nationalism and the Two Koreas (2009)

With the message conveyed by Selig Harrison following a visit to Pyongyang in January 2009 that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) had successfully ‘weaponized’ much of
the plutonium in its nuclear arsenal, the uncertain status of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula again brought heightened tensions to the region, even as the North was clearly interested in the prospect of change associated with the inauguration of President-elect Barack Obama of the United States (US) (Choe 2009). While the key word ‘weaponized’ remains deliberately vague, most observers interpreted the message as meaning that North Korea had built a small set of devices—an estimated four to five weapons, containing about in total 30 kg of plutonium—with its resources, thereby continuing a pattern of deterrence, coupled with rhetorical displays of strength, which it had adopted since its first nuclear test in October 2006. Repeated interruptions to the Six Party Talks designed to bring a resolution to the situation had resulted in reduced dialogue for much of the preceding period, with these delays contingent on critical issues such as the establishment of a verification regime, and North Korea’s willingness to permit inspection of its facilities. Given these circumstances, it was difficult to determine if Harrison’s message represented any substantive change.

The key issues to date include the North’s goal of achieving the completion of two light-water reactors in exchange for agreeing to relinquish its weapons program, as well as a desire to gain access to the nuclear facilities of the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea) as a reciprocal gesture of trust (Kim and Feffer 2008). While both of these goals, particularly the aim of achieving autonomy in terms of meeting its own energy needs, have appeared frequently over the past several years, North Korea’s search for energy resources is one with a much lengthier history, going back to at least the spring of 1948, when the North cut off South Korean access to the northern part of the peninsular electric grid to express its displeasure over UN-sponsored elections in May (United States Department of State 1948: 116-18). As this historical split marked a critical point in the formative relations between the two regions—indeed, the respective zones of occupation had yet to declare independence at this time—the relationship between electric power, whether produced by conventional means or nuclear, and nationalism has much to offer as a form of inquiry. In 1948, the two halves of the peninsula were competing over a Japanese colonial infrastructure, and even then, both North and South were using these resources to narrate their emerging stories.

Linking recent events to this prior history thereby provides a window into the ongoing struggle for energy autonomy on the peninsula,